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# Who Wrote 2 Thessalonians?

## A Fresh Look at an Old Problem

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### Abstract

In light of the New Perspective on Paul, recognition of apocalyptic as a central category in Pauline theology, and the crumbling consensus concerning seven authentic epistles of Paul, it is time to reconsider the arguments for the authenticity of his letters. Here the specific question of the authorship of 2 Thessalonians is re-examined. It is noted that many of the standard arguments for, or against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians are either irrelevant or inconclusive. This discussion seeks to reveal the slender evidential basis of certain 'classic' arguments against the authenticity of the letter, and also to present some fresh reasons why the epistle should be regarded as written by Paul. The implications of including 2 Thessalonians among the authentic Pauline writings are then examined. In particular, it is suggested that the development in Paul's thinking as reflected in 2 Thessalonians reveals that his theological formulations developed in response to situations in his fledgling communities. In this regard, Paul's theological positions emerged through a negotiated response to pressing pastoral situations.

### Keywords

2 Thessalonians, authenticity, authorship, epistolary signature, eschatology, stylometry, theological development, Pauline authorship survey

### Why Re-open the Question?

The widespread and frequently repeated consensus in Pauline scholarship is that of the thirteen letters that were written bearing the name of the apostle, only seven were authentically written by their putative author. In his introductory study to Paul, Gombis articulates this consensus. He states, 'while these 13 letters are attributed to Paul, the majority opinion of scholars is that only seven of them are *certainly* written by Paul. The authorship of the remaining six letters is disputed.'<sup>1</sup> Similar views are rehearsed in advanced studies of Paul and Pauline theology. Dunn is more descriptive in his account of the divide between genuine and non-genuine Pauline letters. He comments:

In the case of Paul, however, we have a variety of letters, seven at least, whose authorship is virtually unquestioned – plus what we might call an afterwave or tail of the comet or, better, the school or studio of Paul, which is still able to tell us something about what went before.<sup>2</sup>

Raymond Brown agrees with this consensus and specifically names the authentic letters: 'in the 50s of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Paul produced the earliest surviving Christian documents I Thess, Gal, Phil, Phlm, I and II Cor, Rom.'<sup>3</sup> This position not only also has a long pedigree in German biblical scholarship, but in fact it finds its origin in that

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<sup>1</sup> Gombis 2010: 3.

<sup>2</sup> Dunn 1998: 13.

<sup>3</sup> Brown 1997: 6.

setting. Writing more than half a century ago, Kümmel summarized the scholarly consensus concerning the authorship of the letters that bear Paul's name. In fairly bland terms he simply stated that '[t]ogether with the four "Pillar epistles," [Rom. 1&2 Cor. and Gal.] I Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon are definitely to be regarded as authentic, whereas the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals is certainly to be denied, and the genuineness of the remaining three epistles (II Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians) is debatable.'<sup>4</sup> This continues to be the commonly held view espoused in German scholarship, and is presented in the standard introductory text of Udo Schnelle,<sup>5</sup> and the more advanced and recent introduction to Paul and his writings edited by Oda Wischmeyer.<sup>6</sup>

There are several problems with this 'consensus'. First, in light of the *New Perspective on Paul* with its nuanced understandings of the nature of Paul's theological convictions, the ground for previous decisions concerning which writings Paul may have authored has shifted substantially. For this reason the question of the authorship of the Pauline letters deserves re-examination, even if the result were to be the reassertion of the standard theory of seven authentic letters. Alternatively, given fresh understandings of Pauline concerns and his central theological convictions the case for that consensus could potentially either be challenged, or perhaps even modified. Secondly, and more specifically, a key element in Paul's thinking that has recently been recognized more fully as being fundamental to the way Paul constructs his overall theological vision is his apocalyptic outlook.<sup>7</sup> While one may wish to critique the way Paul's apocalyptic thinking is represented by scholars such as Martyn<sup>8</sup> and Campbell,<sup>9</sup> nonetheless they have successfully shown that one cannot grasp the essence of Pauline theology without an attempt to integrate Paul's apocalyptic worldview.<sup>10</sup> Given the centrality of apocalyptic thought within 2 Thessalonians, the letter, if authentic, may have much to contribute to understanding

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<sup>4</sup> Kümmel 1966: 178.

<sup>5</sup> Schelle 2005: 169-170.

<sup>6</sup> Here 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians are labelled as deutero-Pauline letters, while the Pastorals are placed in category more distant from Pauline thought being described as trito-Pauline letters. Wischmeyer 2012: 3, 307.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to N.T. Wright for making the observation that the tendency in Pauline studies to recognize the centrality of apocalyptic in his thought is another reason why the question of the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians needs to be reconsidered. Wright's own thinking on the role of apocalyptic in Paul is summarized in Wright 2005: 50-58, and Wright 2012: 367-381; on apocalyptic in Paul see esp. 372-374.

<sup>8</sup> For Martyn's understanding of apocalyptic in Paul's thinking see Martyn 1997a; and Martyn 1997b.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Revelatory or apocalyptic ideas permeate Paul's thought to such an extent that it would be virtually impossible and probably undesirable to offer a brief and simplistic definition of his apocalyptic worldview. Without doubt Paul's apocalypticism was fundamentally Christo-centric. The revelatory or apocalyptic moments that Paul identifies are varied, and encompass differing degrees of divine disclosure, but all focus on Christ being revealed as the centre of divine soteriological action. Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel can be seen as a key revelatory moment (Rom 1.16-17; 16.25), as can Paul's own experience on the Damascus Road when Christ was revealed in him (Gal 1:16), and the climactic revelatory moment is seen as the parousia of the Lord with this final event being the focus of significant attention in the Thessalonian correspondence (2 Thess 1:7; cf. 1 Cor 1:7). Dunn observes the multi-valence and richness of Paul's apocalyptic thought when he states, 'This apocalyptic perspective, this eschatological shift, dictates much of what is most characteristic in Paul's theology. Not a break with the past so much as a transformation of the past's relation to the present and the present's relation to the future.' Dunn 1998: 726.

a central facet of Paul's thought, and moreover it might provide important resources for better appreciating the development and formulation of his theology.

The third, and perhaps even more telling reason for re-opening the question is that even among those who rehearse the scholarly consensus, many of those scholars simply do not believe it. For instance, Dunn, after accurately describing this supposed consensus, articulates his own position. He notes, '[t]here is a roughly even split among critical commentators on Colossians and 2 Thessalonians (I regard the latter as written by Paul and the former as probably written by Timothy before Paul's death; ...).'<sup>11</sup> Therefore Dunn holds to at least eight authentic letters, and possibly nine.<sup>12</sup> Gombis is even more radical, and maintains that all thirteen letters are genuine (although he offers no specific comments in relation to 2 Thessalonians).<sup>13</sup> Even Kümmel, who clearly articulated the consensus and presented its dominance in German scholarship, went on to argue for the Pauline authorship of both 2 Thessalonians, and Colossians.<sup>14</sup> This trend is perhaps best exemplified in Trebilco's work on self-designations and group identity. The scope of his monograph is wider than the Pauline writings, but in relation to those letters he simply states, '[w]hen discussing Paul's letters, along with the seven undisputed letters ... I will include Colossians and 2 Thessalonians.'<sup>15</sup> No attempt is made to justify this stance, apart from a few references to the work of other scholars. In fact, among the range of books on the Pauline letters it is possible to observe the common phenomenon of stating the hypothesis of seven authentic letters, then either immediately or at a later point in the discussion it becomes obvious that the writer does not hold to that consensus. It is in fact possible to find scholars who hold to the authenticity of nearly every possible number of Pauline epistles between seven and thirteen. To be sure a number of scholars do hold to the consensus. However the most common deviation is the single addition of Colossians, or not quite as commonly 2 Thessalonians – thus giving eight authentic letters. Others add both of these to the genuine Pauline corpus – giving a total of nine authentic letters. Less common is the further addition of Ephesians – resulting in a ten-letter corpus. Others feel that 2 Timothy, or at least fragments embedded in it are Pauline – potentially giving eleven genuine letters. Although not a commonly articulated position, there are instances where the authenticity of only one of the Pauline epistles has been questioned, thus resulting in a set of twelve authentic letters. In this vein, Friedrich Schleiermacher rejected the authenticity of 1 Timothy, while accepting Paul's authorship of 2 Timothy and Titus.<sup>16</sup> Finally some scholars

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<sup>11</sup> Dunn 1998: 13, n.39.

<sup>12</sup> The issue becomes one of definition. In relation to Colossians Dunn suggests that 'if Timothy did indeed write for Paul at Paul's behest, but also with Paul's approval of what was in the event written (prior to adding 4:18), then we have to call the letter "Pauline" in the full sense of the word, and the distinction between "Pauline" and "post-Pauline" as applied to Colossians becomes relatively unimportantly.' Dunn 1996: 38. Bird takes this perspective one-step further describing Paul as the author of Philemon, co-author of Colossians, and commissioning editor of Ephesians. See Bird 2009: 9.

<sup>13</sup> While Gombis advocates the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, scanning the index of scriptural citations one finds a single reference to a passage from this epistle (2 Thess. 1.8), which is cited in the section dealing with Paul's expectation of the coming judgment. Gombis 2010: 156.

<sup>14</sup> For the former see Kümmel 1966: 189-190; the latter is discussed on pages 240-244.

<sup>15</sup> Trebilco 2012: 13.

<sup>16</sup> Schleiermacher 1807. The main difficulty that Schleiermacher identified in his letter was that 1 Timothy uses vocabulary not found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. For a fuller discussion of Schleiermacher's position see Johnson 2001: 42-43. Thanks to Simon Gathercole, who tracked

assert the authenticity of all the Pastorals resulting in a full listing of thirteen authentic letters.<sup>17</sup> However, surely somebody must have asserted the authenticity of all the Pauline letters apart from perhaps Ephesians – however, as of yet I have not discovered this being stated explicitly in a scholarly work.

Hence, such divergence and disagreement is one of the strongest reasons to re-open the debate concerning the authorship of the Pauline letters. The supposed consensus simply does not exist. Here the question to be addressed specifically relates to the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians. Despite numerous scholars stating that they believe it to be genuinely Pauline, few reasons are advanced for that decision. This is in marked contrast to the attention that has been given to defending the authenticity of Colossians.<sup>18</sup>

### **History and Reasons for Questioning the Authenticity of 2 Thessalonians**

It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians was first questioned. In 1801 Schmidt published a work that introduced one of the classic arguments against the Pauline authorship. The argument was based upon the perceived change in theological perspective concerning the parousia. It was suggested that in 2 Thessalonians there is the presentation of an eschatological timeline which both lessened the imminence of the second coming, and is coupled with the introduction of various apocalyptic features or figures resulting in a non-Pauline perspective on the parousia.<sup>19</sup> This argument has become one of the cornerstones in the case against the Pauline authorship of the epistle.<sup>20</sup> Recent commentators, both German and English, have presented this apparent change in theological perspective as being untenable in connection with the hypothesis of the Pauline authorship of both of the Thessalonian epistles. Thus Trilling observes,

Auch die von Vertretern der Unechtheit ausgesprochene Meinung, 2Thess solle die Eschatologie bzw. die Naherwartung des 1Thess »korrigieren«, dürfte nicht das Richtige treffen. Besser geht man davon aus, daß der zweite Brief eine bestimmte Auffassung zurückweist, für die sich deren Vertreter auf 1Thess berufen konnten und dies wohl auch taten, daß sich darin aber die Intention des Autors nicht erschöpft.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Richard sees the shift in eschatological pattern as evidence of the work of two different authors. In relation to common authorship he states ‘scholars have recognized serious difficulties posed, among other issues, by the eschatology of 1 Thess 4:13-5:11 which presumes the Lord’s imminent return and 2 Thess 2:1-12

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down this example of a scholar who held that twelve Pauline letters were authentic, when I had only been able to surmise that some scholar must have held this position.

<sup>17</sup> Notably Johnson first rehearses the ‘standard position’, ‘a broad consensus has developed: Nearly all critical scholars accept seven letters ... as written directly by Paul.’ However, he then states, ‘The reader may be surprised at my positive bias for the authenticity of all the letters ... and a conviction that the whole Pauline corpus is one that Paul “authored” but did not necessarily write.’ Johnson 1986: 255-257.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion in Barclay 1997 [2004]: esp. chap. 2 ‘Who Wrote Colossians’, 18-36. Barclay does not advocate either side of the debate, but lays out the relative merits of the cases for and against Paul’s authorship of Colossians.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Schmidt 1801.

<sup>20</sup> Even scholars who affirm Pauline authorship, note that the difference in eschatological outlook is one of the fundamental reasons why the common authorship of the two letters is refuted. Thus Williams states, ‘[t]hose doubting that Paul wrote it claim that the eschatology of 2 Thessalonians differs from that of 1 Thessalonians to the point of contradiction.’ Williams 1992: 11.

<sup>21</sup> Trilling 1980: 25.

which attempts to dispel such a notion.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Rigaux has noted that some who have proposed a disjunction between the two eschatological schemes contained in the epistles have attempted to identify the figure described as the 'lawless one' in 2 Thess 2.7 (but in the literature often called the 'antichrist'), with a historical personage from a time after the death of Paul. Suggestions have been varied, with Schmidt seeing this figure linked to the Nero *redivivus* legend in the time of Trajan,<sup>23</sup> while more commonly it is linked to Caligula or Nero or even a combination of aspects drawn from the two figures.<sup>24</sup> While such suggestions are intriguing, they are at best corollaries of the judgment that the epistle is not Pauline and certainly not evidence for that position. For this reason, such theories should be set aside when deciding on the authenticity or otherwise of 2 Thessalonians. They would only be relevant if there were a direct anachronistic reference to a figure such as Trajan, or an unambiguous recollection of events that transpired after the death of Paul. Since that is not the case, the strength of this argument is based on a judgment related to two factors. First, whether the eschatological schemes in the two letters are considered to be irreconcilable, and second, even if that is the case whether it would be possible for a specific figure, Paul, to change his point of view to such a degree.

However, since this initial questioning of the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians on the basis of conflicting eschatological outlooks, other arguments have come to the fore. Observations concerning the literary relationship between the two epistles and the stylistic differences between them appear to have become the primary argument against the authenticity of the letter.<sup>25</sup> Two phenomena are presented as evidence of the pseudonymous character of the letter. First, it is stated that 2 Thessalonians is literarily dependent on 1 Thessalonians. Richard summarises the case as follows:

Several features of 2 Thessalonians are striking even to the cursory reader. The letter, unlike other Pauline letters, has two thanksgivings as does 1 Thessalonians. Its epistolary opening is nearly verbatim in agreement with that of its model, a situation which occurs nowhere else in Paul, not even in the two Corinthian letter openings. Likewise there are parallel, double prayers and conclusions.<sup>26</sup>

Although Rigaux rejects the arguments presented in support of the non-Pauline authorship of the letter, he nonetheless tackles the issue of literary dependence first, since as is noted above this is often viewed as the most compelling source of evidence.<sup>27</sup> In fact Esler throws down the challenge to those who defend Pauline authorship to provide an explanation of the literary similarities: 'Supporters of authenticity ... need to explain what has happened that induced Paul to write a second letter to Thessalonica using language and structure so similar to that in 1 Thessalonians.'<sup>28</sup> This challenge is fair, but applies equally to those who support Pauline authorship, and to those who reject it.

Furthermore, it is also claimed that the stylistic and grammatical differences between the two Thessalonian epistles are of such significance that they militate against seeing them as originating from the same authorial hand. In terms of

<sup>22</sup> Richard 1995: 19.

<sup>23</sup> Schmidt 1855: 119-124.

<sup>24</sup> For examples of these various positions see the discussion in Rigaux 1956: 140.

<sup>25</sup> The first to propose that the sequence of similar topics in the two epistles was a basis for doubting the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians was Wrede 1903.

<sup>26</sup> Richard 1995: 20.

<sup>27</sup> Rigaux 1956: 133-139.

<sup>28</sup> Esler 2000: 1213.

vocabulary, Richard suggests that while specific terms are Pauline, often in agreement with vocabulary in 1 Thessalonians, their usage or the constructions they form have an un-Pauline character.<sup>29</sup> More substantive are Richard's comments on what he perceives as stylistic peculiarities in 2 Thessalonians. Reducing his discussion to the key points, he presents the following four items as un-Pauline stylistic peculiarities.

- (a) The author makes extensive use of parallelism. ... (b) There is an absence of typically Pauline vocabulary and themes. ... (c) The author chooses an authoritative rather than an argumentative approach to issues. ... (d) Many stylistic features and emphases are more easily discerned by examining the author's redaction of Pauline passages, appropriation of Pauline themes, and peculiar repetitive style.<sup>30</sup>

While it may be tempting to play these two arguments off against each other: the contents are too similar to support Pauline authorship, whereas the style is too different to uphold Pauline authorship – this should not necessarily be seen as a case of two contradictory arguments. It is indeed possible to envisage a scenario where a later author copied the structure and themes of his exemplar, but is not attuned to the stylistic peculiarities of the source and thus betrays the later document to be a pale imitation of the earlier one. Rather, the two arguments need to be judged on their respective merits. The problem arises because there is no agreed datum by which to measure the level of divergent style that results in postulating a different author, or the level of overlap that proves one document is a direct copy of another.

Other arguments that have been used to support the case for the pseudonymous authorship of 2 Thessalonians include the following. The change in the tone of the letters is sometimes presented as a basis for rejecting the common authorship of 1&2 Thessalonians. This perceived warmth of 1 Thessalonians, is seen as at best dimly replicated in the second letter. With the latter's supposed poor attempt at copying the cordiality of the first epistle, giving way to an authoritarian attitude. Thus Richard comments, '[w]hile retaining occasional pleas ("we urge you" in 2:1 or "we exhort" in 3:12) the author's preference is for command (3:4, 6, 10, 12) and authoritative teaching (1:8; 2:5, 12; 3:14).'<sup>31</sup> This is not a particularly strong argument and fails to be convincing on two fronts. First, in the Corinthian correspondence Paul shows that he is capable of greater variation of tone than that exhibited between 1&2 Thessalonians. Changes in tone appear to be more the product of the author's mood and the recipients' situation, rather than a reliable indicator of change of author. Secondly, and perhaps more significant is the fact that the tone of 2 Thessalonians is not particularly 'cold'. Marshall makes this point compellingly and with due force.

it is sure time the myth of the cold tone of the letter was exploded. Granted that it [2 Thessalonians] is not as full as personal references as 1 Thessalonians nor written on such a crest of emotion, it is nevertheless by no means cold in tone. The claim that 'we ought to give thanks as is fitting' is a cold and informal expression is quite unfounded (cf. Phil. 1:7). The personal concern of the author for the readers shines through this letter.<sup>32</sup>

Hence the argument concerning tone appears to misjudge the degree of warmth exhibited in 2 Thessalonians, and is also an unreliable indicator of authorship.

Moreover, it is suggested that the letter strives to defend its own authenticity too stridently, thereby revealing precisely the opposite to be the case. In relation to 2 Thess 2.2, which Esler describes as 'one of the most important verses in the

<sup>29</sup> Richard 1995: 22.

<sup>30</sup> Richard 1995: 23.

<sup>31</sup> Richard 1995: 24.

<sup>32</sup> Marshall 1983: 34.

letter',<sup>33</sup> he gives two possible explanations of the statement that the Thessalonians should not 'be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit, or a message, or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come' (2 Thess 2.2). He sees this as meaning that the Thessalonians had either received a forged letter, or that a letter which he did write, namely 1 Thessalonians, was being misinterpreted. He continues by explaining why he understands this statement as evidence for the non-Pauline authorship of the letter.

If Paul had actually written 2 Thessalonians, he would have signally failed to address either alternative. For he neither denounces the letter as a forgery nor seeks directly to correct the misinterpretation. The statement is easier to interpret on the hypothesis of pseudonymity. Paul's letters were difficult and liable to be misunderstood (see 2 Pet 3:15-16). This could have been seen as the fate of 1 Thess 4:13-5:11. There are several statements in this passage that could have been used to support an argument that the day of the Lord has come. 2 Thess 2:2 makes good sense as an attempt by its author to counter a misinterpretation of 1 Thess 4:13-5:11.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth making two preliminary points in response to this suggestion. First, the phrase 'by a spirit, or a message, or a letter as if from us' offers a plurality of possibilities to explain where the Thessalonians may have derived the false teaching, and this suggests that the author is unsure of its source. However, the final option 'a letter as if from us', most naturally suggests that the author could conceive of the possibility of a letter written in Paul's name, that is a forged letter.<sup>35</sup> Second, Esler's argument against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians based on this verse appears to be conceived in terms of a reference to 1 Thessalonians either as the misinterpreted or forged letter. However, if the reference to a forged letter was either hypothetical or describing another no-longer extant epistle, then the statement may be interpreted in a more straightforward manner.

The final argument that has gained some wider currency concerns the Pauline signature at the end of 2 Thessalonians. In only three of the generally accepted genuine epistles does Paul draw attention to a final greeting written in his own hand (1 Cor 16.21; Gal 6.11; Phlm 19). The same phenomenon occurs in two further epistles in the Pauline corpus, whose authorship is disputed (Col 4.18; 2 Thess 3.17). Whereas the other four instances simply draw attention to the phenomenon (maybe with the instance in Phlm 19 acting as a surety to repay a debt – although this may be a rhetorical strategy), only in 2 Thess 3.17 is this signature declared to be a mark of verification of Paul's authorship of this letter. Many who doubt the authenticity of the letter have seen this as a not too subtle attempt by the pseudonymous writer to claim Pauline authorship for this later composition. Hence from this perspective Richard makes the following observations and conclusion:

3:17 is ponderous in its insistence on authenticity. ... Only in the Paulinist letter, however, does one find an explicit note that the handwriting serves as an authenticating mark. ... The pseudonymous character of verse 17 is further confirmed by consideration of other references in the document to letter writing: 2:2, 15, and 3:14. The first of these ("by letter allegedly by us") provides a glimpse into the complex world of post-Pauline

<sup>33</sup> Esler 2000: 1216.

<sup>34</sup> Esler 2000: 1216.

<sup>35</sup> A number of commentators have wanted to resist the possibility that Paul could have conceived of letters being forged in his name, especially at as early a date as an authentic 2 Thessalonians would have been written. Hence the sense of this phrase is sometimes understood in less natural ways: '[t]he enigmatic "as though through us" is best understood ... as referring not directly to the *form* by which the misinformation had been mediated to them (i.e., Spirit, word, letter), but to the *content* of it.' Fee 2010: 275.



years. Someone has composed a letter in Paul's name to authenticate the community's apocalyptic thinking.<sup>36</sup>

Similar observations are also made by Esler and Trilling. The former states that '[t]he self-conscious (and unique) way in which the author draws attention to the practice in 3:17 by saying that 'This is my mark' (*sēmeion*, sign) is itself suspicious.'<sup>37</sup> From a slightly different perspective, Trilling seeks to lessen any loaded evaluations of pseudepigraphical literature, but simply takes it for granted that such a self-authenticating formula is clearly signal of non-Pauline authorship.

Seit der umfassenderen Kenntnis der antiken pseudepigraphischen Literatur und Technik ist der Anstoß daran insofern vermindert worden, als auch eine solche massive Fingierung eines beglaubigenden Echtheitszeichens tatsächlich belegt ist. Das Für und Wider zu 2Thess soll hier nicht dargestellt werden, es ist nach allen Seiten über lange Zeit hin erwogen worden.<sup>38</sup>

While there are other arguments against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, those discussed here that relate to conflicting eschatological outlooks, stylistic divergences, literary parallels, and the use of a self-authenticating formula, remain the most prominent and are viewed as providing the strongest evidence for non-Pauline authorship. It should be noted in relation on this last point, the self-authenticating formula, that those on both sides of the debate generally agree that in the case of 2 Thessalonians, 'Pauline intertextuality is essentially limited to a single work: 1 Thessalonians.'<sup>39</sup> The implication of this will be considered when the Pauline signature is discussed further.

### **Inconclusive Arguments used to Support Authenticity**

There have been several arguments, or perhaps better 'theories' or 'observations' that have been advanced in support of the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians. Four that are often repeated seem to have little traction in addressing the fundamental issue. First, it has been observed by several commentators on 2 Thessalonians that among their band of fellow commentators, very few have written in support of pseudonymity. Fee states this observation forcefully, 'the writing of a commentary on this letter in and of itself tends to push one towards authenticity regarding authorship so that there has been only one significant commentary in English over the past century and a half that has tried to make sense of this letter as a forgery.'<sup>40</sup> Here the one commentary he refers to is that of Richard in the *Sacra Pagina* series. There is, however, also Esler's treatment in the *Oxford Bible Commentary*, and Helmut Koester's long-promised *Hermeneia* commentary on the Thessalonian Epistles, which will also take 2 Thessalonians as not being authored by the apostle. However, in many ways such arguments are simply irrelevant. The underlying suggestion is that close engagement with the text will convince objective enquirers to support Pauline authorship. Apart from marginalizing non-Anglophone scholarship that sees the epistle as non-Pauline,<sup>41</sup> the argument commits the statistical error of skewing the sample. This is because it may well be the case that those who are unconvinced of

<sup>36</sup> Richard 1995: 394.

<sup>37</sup> Esler 2000: 1219.

<sup>38</sup> Trilling 1980: 158.

<sup>39</sup> Pervo 2010: 77. There have occasionally been dissenting voices, see Leppa 2006: 175-195.

<sup>40</sup> Fee 2010: 237.

<sup>41</sup> Most recently see Redalié 2011: 19-29.

Pauline authorship do not wish to invest the time writing a commentary on 2 Thessalonians.

A second observation that has little bearing on the question of authorship concerns the reception history of the epistle. As part of his chapter on the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, Rigaux discusses the utilisation of the two letters in primitive Christian literature. As his earliest example of clear use of 2 Thessalonians he presents parallels with the Letters of Ignatius, which he dates to around 110.<sup>42</sup> Thus the phrase εἰς τὴν ὑπομονὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ (2 Thess 3.5) is seen as providing the literary basis for the similar phrase ἐν ὑπομονῇ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (I.Rom. 10.3).<sup>43</sup> The second example is drawn from the parallel between μή τις ὑμᾶς ἐξαπατήσῃ (2 Thess 2.3) and μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς ἐξαπατάτω (I.Eph. 8.1). It is questionable whether such faint and fleeting phrases actually do establish the case for literary dependence. In fact a recent study of the use by Ignatius of the writings that were to form the NT, concluded that among the Pauline epistles the only demonstrable cases of literary dependence could be made for 1 Cor, Eph, 1&2 Tim.<sup>44</sup> Very few scholars would see Ignatius' use of this quartet of epistles as evidence for their Pauline authorship. It needs to be stressed that while tracing the literary relationships and use of NT writings by later authors may provide evidence about circulation and even a *terminus ad quem*, such relationships by themselves reveal nothing concerning the authorship of the source document. In fact prior to the appearance of Marcion's ten-letter Pauline canon,<sup>45</sup> 2 Thessalonians appears to be virtually invisible in the surviving historical sources.<sup>46</sup> In fact if one were to invoke the hard data of surviving manuscripts of the text of 2 Thessalonians, one is struck by the paucity of evidence. From the third century P<sup>30</sup> preserves only part of the first two verses of the opening chapter; while P<sup>92</sup>, dated to the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century, preserves fragments of four verses, 2 Thess 1.4-5, 11-12. In fact it is not until one turns to the great fourth century codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus that the next witnesses are found, and in these manuscripts the text of 2 Thessalonians is preserved in its entirety. However, these observations speak only of the vicissitudes of manuscript preservation and perhaps also offer limited evidence concerning the circulation of the epistle. Yet in no way is such data relevant to, let alone determinative for the question of authorship.

In contrast to these two observations based on trends among modern commentators or citations by early Christian writers, the next two arguments attempt to offer plausible hypotheses for the literary composition of 2 Thessalonians in relation to that of 1 Thessalonians. In order to account both for the alteration in eschatological outlook between the two letters, and the perception that the second letter made greater use of Jewish traditions, Harnack proposed that whereas the first letter was written to a gentile congregation in Thessalonica, the second was addressed to a separate ethnically Jewish group in the same city.<sup>47</sup> However despite what this theory possesses in intellectual imagination and creativity, it lacks in solid evidentiary

<sup>42</sup> The dating of Ignatius' letters remains a hotly debated question. For discussion and bibliography see Foster 2007: 84-89; Barnes 2008: 119-130.

<sup>43</sup> Rigaux cites the phrase from 2 Thess 3.5 as ἐν ὑπομονῇ Χριστοῦ, which suggests even greater conformity with I.Rom. 10.3 than is actually the case. See Rigaux 1956: 116.

<sup>44</sup> See Foster 2005: 159-186; esp. 172.

<sup>45</sup> Foster 2010: 269-280; esp. 272-273.

<sup>46</sup> A possible exception might be a couple of allusions in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians. See Holmes 2005: 214-215.

<sup>47</sup> Harnack 1910: 560-578.

support. There is no archaeological or textual evidence on which to postulate the existence of two ethnically segregated communities of believers in Jesus at Thessalonica in the first or second centuries (or beyond). This theory was based upon the inference that the wider phenomenon of separation between Jewish and Gentile Christians was also in evidence in the microcosm of Thessalonica. However, it is hard to imagine, as this theory requires, that Paul could have been responsible for the foundation of two separate communities in the same city that were split along ethnographic lines, given both his ecclesiology and his theological understanding of the place of the gentiles among the people of God. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this theory has not attracted ongoing support.

The second hypothesis, which has had wider but nonetheless minority support, is the notion that the epistle that is now called *Second Thessalonians* was actually written earlier than the epistle that has become labelled as *First Thessalonians*. This idea has a long pedigree being suggested at least as early as 1640, in Hugo Grotius' discussion of the Antichrist.<sup>48</sup> Recent support for this theory is found chiefly in Wanamaker's commentary.<sup>49</sup> He notes correctly that '[t]here is no a priori reason why the canonical order should be the historical order.'<sup>50</sup> He also states that if the ordering is reversed then many of the arguments for the non-Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians lose their probative force. Consequently he asserts that 'those who wish to maintain that 2 Thessalonians is not Pauline must begin by demonstrating the priority of 1 Thessalonians or lose a considerable portion of the cumulative evidence on which they depend.'<sup>51</sup> Thus Wanamaker not only repackages the classic arguments of Manson for the priority of 2 Thessalonians,<sup>52</sup> he also calls upon defenders of the traditional order to provide a plausible historical reconstruction of the literary correspondence with the Thessalonians.<sup>53</sup> Without rehearsing all the details of the standard counter-arguments, the injunction 'to stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught whether through our word or through our letter' (2 Thess 2.15), does appear to be a reference to an earlier item of correspondence. Admittedly, one could hypothesize that this was a now no-longer extant letter, but given the existence of 1 Thessalonians with its extensive teaching on a number of subjects it appears unnecessary to postulate the hypothetical existence of a third letter to the Thessalonians.

Moreover, in terms of the historical scenario that might have called forth the second letter, the answer appears to lie in the modification of eschatological outlook. Paul's initial eschatological teaching as given in 1 Thessalonians had not had the outcome he desired. It had either been misconstrued, or because of its ambiguity was open to an interpretation that Paul did not intend or foresee. Consequently, 2 Thessalonians was written with a narrower focus than the first letter, namely to correct or clarify Paul's eschatological teaching and the Thessalonians' interpretation of it. Therefore reversing the order of the epistles does not appear to be the most natural reading of the historical circumstances behind Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians. Therefore, such a move should not be invoked as a means of resolving the question of the authorship of 2 Thessalonians.

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<sup>48</sup> Grotius 1640: 437.

<sup>49</sup> Wanamaker 1990: 37-45.

<sup>50</sup> Wanamaker 1990: 38.

<sup>51</sup> Wanamaker 1990: 45.

<sup>52</sup> Manson, 1962: 259-278.

<sup>53</sup> Wanamaker 1990: 39.

Consequently, many of the standard arguments marshalled to support the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians are inconclusive or irrelevant. Among these are attempts to produce a ‘head count’ of the opinions of those who have written English-language commentaries, the appeal to the early citation of the epistle or the opinions of patristic authors, proposals that the epistles were written to two different communities when there is no direct archaeological or literary evidence to support such a proposal, and the theory that the canonical order should be inverted when *Second Thessalonians* already mentions a former piece of correspondence from Paul. Thus consideration of the style, contents, and the epistles own claims about its authorship remain central in the discussion concerning authenticity.

### Relevant Arguments for Authenticity

Two types of arguments are relevant here. First those that rebut the case for the non-Pauline authorship, and second those that put forward the positive case for the seeing Paul as the authorial figure behind the epistle. If the letter is genuine, then the final signature and greeting makes it apparent that Paul did not scribe the first forty-five of the letter’s forty-seven verses. The definition of the term ‘authorship’ is not unambiguous in relation to the Pauline letters, being complicated by the use of secretaries with unknown degrees of autonomy or control in relation to Paul’s editorial control.<sup>54</sup> Rather than attempt to determine the specific level of input that Paul may have had in relation to the composition of the letters that bear his name, here a broad definition of ‘authorship’ will be employed. The primary idea is that although Paul may not have penned the entirety of the letter himself, he was present and directing his scribe to some undeterminable extent, and that this is the same process that is operative at least with some of the seven letters that are adjudged to be authentic (cf. Rom. 16.22).

First, the question of the literary relationship between the two epistles needs to be addressed. As was outlined, since Wrede introduced this argument it has been seen as the key piece of data in supporting the case for the non-Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians,<sup>55</sup> with the second letter seen as being a later literary modification of the first epistle.<sup>56</sup> However, if one were to concede for the sake of argument that the parallels were significant enough to necessitate support of the hypothesis of literary dependence it would not necessarily follow that Pauline authorship would be disproven. It is not impossible that Paul or his scribe retained a copy or a draft of 1 Thessalonians, or perhaps more plausibly that the two letters were written in a sufficiently close temporal span that key phrases were able to be recalled by memory. Obviously as the length of verbatim parallel passages increases, recourse to memory as an explanation diminishes. However, obviously it would be the strength of the supposed literary parallels that would undercut the value of this argument. It is demonstrable that the introductory greetings given in both of the two Thessalonian letters are virtually identical (1 Thess 1.1//2 Thess 1.1-2a),<sup>57</sup> with certain later manuscripts producing even greater conformity through the insertion of 2 Thess 1.2b at the end of 1 Thess 1.1.<sup>58</sup> The same holds for the closing grace (1 Thess

<sup>54</sup> See Richards 1991; and Richards 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Wrede 1903.

<sup>56</sup> Trilling 1972: 67-108.

<sup>57</sup> The sequence of nineteen words of 1 Thess 1.1 is almost exactly replicated in 2 Thess 1.1-2a apart from the addition of the pronoun ἡμῶν after the noun πατρί in 2 Thess 1.1.

<sup>58</sup> The addition is found in the following manuscripts: ⋈ A (D) I 33 Maj (m) vg<sup>mss</sup> sy<sup>h\*\*</sup> bo<sup>pt</sup>.

5.28//2 Thess 3.18), with the latter epistle adding one word to the formula contained in 1 Thessalonians. Without rehearsing all the details of arguments laid out fully elsewhere, with the exception of only four sets of parallel verses,<sup>59</sup> it is possible to note that Malherbe's conclusion appears to hold: '[t]here are similarities between the two letters, but they are not as great as is frequently thought, and they differ in importance.'<sup>60</sup>

As was noted, the argument concerning the literary parallels is frequently paired with claims about the divergence of grammatical or stylistic features. The trouble with such arguments is that those who defend the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians simply assert that the differences in style are no greater than that which exists among various genuine Pauline letters. So the force of such claims becomes difficult to assess. What is required is a more objective measure of stylistic difference. Despite openness to new methodologies there appears to a tendency for New Testament scholars to balk at the application of numerical or statistical analysis of textual data. While in some cases this is simply due to some form of dyscalculia, at other times scholars are not persuaded that sample sizes are sufficiently large or that the statistical techniques have a tolerable level of robustness. Notwithstanding these concerns, the initial application of multivariate analysis (MVA) and stylometric techniques for measuring the stylistic variance among the Pauline writings has generated results that on the whole appear in line with what scholars have intuited through years of familiarity with the texts.<sup>61</sup> Without rehearsing the technicalities of creating appropriate datasets, it is worth mentioning that Mealand measured stylistic difference across twenty-five variables including the most common ten function words.<sup>62</sup> These are considered to be less susceptible to variance due to differences in subject matter. To summarise Mealand's overall results, the Pastorals formed a tight cluster of writing with a stylistic coherence, and on a map of stylistic relationships the Pastorals were the most distant group from another important cluster of samples derived from Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and Galatians. Interestingly, but perhaps reassuringly Colossians and Ephesians formed another closely related cluster. However, Mealand's analysis revealed that 'Colossians and Ephesians separated in one direction and the Pastorals in another.'<sup>63</sup> This Colossians and Ephesians grouping was not as distant on the stylistic map from the Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and Galatians group as the Pastorals. Here it should be noted that the approach gives a measure of the proximity of stylistic relations, it remains a value judgement as to what level of distance would cause one to infer a difference in authorship.

For the present discussion, the interesting aspect of Mealand's study was the fourth cluster that emerged.<sup>64</sup> This group comprised Philippians and 1 & 2

<sup>59</sup> The four sets of verses are 1 Thess 2.13//2 Thess 2.13; 1 Thess 3.11//2 Thess 3.5; 1 Thess 4.1//2 Thess 3.1; 1 Thess 5.23//2 Thess 3.16. Other proposed parallels share little common extended vocabulary.

<sup>60</sup> Malherbe 2000: 357.

<sup>61</sup> It is appropriate to acknowledge the ongoing work of David Mealand in this regard. Through a series of extend discussions it has been possible to learn of refinements and applications of computer assisted statistical analysis of the data sets derived from the Pauline writings.

<sup>62</sup> Mealand 1995: 61-92; esp. 64-66.

<sup>63</sup> Mealand 1995: 92.

<sup>64</sup> Philemon was excluded from the analysis because the sample size was too small to produce meaningful statistic analysis. Samples were generally set at a 1000 words. Mealand explains a certain challenge that had to be addressed. 'A very common sample size is 1000 words, and this has been used here with two exceptions. The two exceptions are that 2 Thessalonians only weighs 823

Thessalonians. Interestingly, on the stylistic map this cluster occupied the central position with the other clusters showing varying degrees of divergence from this medial group.<sup>65</sup> Also on some of the statistical measures, Colossians separated away from Ephesians and tended towards this central grouping.<sup>66</sup> From his extensive analysis Mealand found that the multivariate analysis supported the following findings in relation to 2 Thessalonians.

While there is some slight evidence distinguishing Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians from the major Paulines, this distinction is not sharp enough to be decisive. It may be worth recording that of these three letters it was 1 Thessalonians rather than 2 Thessalonians which seemed to be slightly more distant on the criteria used. When 2 Thessalonians was specifically subjected to discriminant analysis as a doubtful sample it was decisively classed with Paul.<sup>67</sup>

While some may question the applicability of such statistical techniques as a tool for judging stylistic similarity, given the polarization of opinion between scholars over assessments of the style of 2 Thessalonians as Pauline or otherwise, it appears that these more accurate and objective measures of stylistic similarity should not be rejected without due consideration. What this analysis reveals is that if one wishes to reject 2 Thessalonians as being Pauline because of the stylistic distance from the group of Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and Galatians, then to be consistent also 1 Thessalonians, and perhaps Philippians, must likewise be classed as non-Pauline.

The Pauline signature at the conclusion of 2 Thessalonians also deserves further consideration. The argument mounted by some of those who reject Pauline authorship, is that this, the longest of the explicit Pauline signature formulae, betrays itself as spurious by stridently asserting its genuineness.<sup>68</sup> Collins makes this case with a literary flourish, '[t]he modern reader has the impression that the author of 2 Thessalonians, as Hamlet's queen, protests too much.'<sup>69</sup> For the sake of argument, the implications of reading this signature as stemming from a non-Pauline author without any form of oversight from Paul will be considered. The formula is presented in the following form:

ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ Παύλου, ὃ ἐστὶν σημεῖον ἐν πάσῃ ἐπιστολῇ,  
οὕτως γράφω (2 Thess 3.17)

The opening clause, ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ Παύλου, is an exact parallel to 1 Cor 16.21 and Col 4.18. By contrast, the signature in Phlm 1.19 acts as a surety guaranteeing repayment if claimed, and the formula in Gal 6.11 may be an intentional contrast with those described in the following verse as 'desiring to make a good show in the flesh'. As there are no obvious identifiable strong parallels between 2 Thessalonians and Colossians or Philemon, and only one verbally similar parallel with Galatians (Gal 6.9//2 Thess 3.13),<sup>70</sup> it would appear that if a supposed non-Pauline author has derived knowledge of this expression from any other epistle it

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words, and Titus is a mere 659 words long. In these cases I used almost the whole epistle as a sample but made the total up to 1000 by multiplication.' Mealand 1995: 64-65.

<sup>65</sup> Mealand 1995: 68.

<sup>66</sup> Mealand 1995: 78.

<sup>67</sup> Mealand 1995: 86.

<sup>68</sup> For instance, see Richard 1995: 394.

<sup>69</sup> Collins 1988: 223.

<sup>70</sup> While the expression in 2 Thess 3.13 'do not grow weary of doing good' has its closest literary parallel in Gal 6.9 'let us not grow weary in doing good', the idea is present in the closing imperatives of 1 Thessalonians, 'always seek after that which is good' (1 Thess 5.15). So it appears unlikely that a strong case can be mounted for 2 Thessalonians having knowledge of Galatians.

must be from 1 Corinthians. Given the lack of other parallels, a direct literary relationship between 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians may not be likely. Furthermore if one were persuaded of a literary relationship the direction of that dependence would also need to be established. However, again for the sake of argument, assuming that 2 Thessalonians did in fact know 1 Corinthians, then the author of 2 Thessalonians would appear to be aware of only a single case where Paul greeted his recipients in his own hand. Furthermore, unless that author was consulting the autograph of 1 Corinthians, that particular feature might not stand out from the continuous script of what would be the uniform hand of a subsequent copyist. In fact, for the author of 2 Thessalonians to claim that a handwritten signature was Paul's uniform practice in all his letters would require him to be familiar with a significant collection of Pauline epistles. While the fleeting note in 2 Pet 3.16, which is of uncertain date but perhaps early second century, shows some awareness of a multiplicity of Pauline letters, it is not until the mid-second century with Marcion's ten-letter collection that one begins to be able to identify a sizeable corpus of Pauline letters. While this collection process may have begun earlier in the second century, it would appear that a pseudonymous author would not have had access to the resources of a Pauline letter collection until the second century on which to base the claim that Paul wrote a greeting in his hand in all his letters. So one would be forced to postulate a very late date for 2 Thessalonians, if it were non-Pauline.

However, such a position quickly falls apart on other grounds. If the putative pseudonymous author were consulting a Pauline letter collection around the beginning of the second century (if such a collection even existed at that point) this presumably would not have been formed from the autographs. Reading many of Paul's epistles, such as Romans, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Ephesians, and 1 Thessalonians, it would not appear to be the case that Paul did make a sign in his own handwriting in every letter. Again, also self-defeating for this hypothesis is the fact noted by both defenders and opponents of Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, that the only Pauline epistle that appears to be known by 2 Thessalonians is in fact 1 Thessalonians, where there is no reference to Paul making a sign in his own hand. Moreover, Donfried highlights the ever-increasing implausibility of pushing the date of 2 Thessalonians later (which appears to be required because of the signature formula, if the letter were written by a non-Pauline author). Thus Donfried states, '[i]t is difficult to imagine a setting where a letter specifically addressed to the Thessalonians by Paul would be relevant and convincing to a non-Thessalonian church some thirty or more years after the Apostle's death.'<sup>71</sup> However, Donfried rejects Pauline authorship and consequently is forced to find a plausible set of circumstances that account for 2 Thessalonians as a pseudonymous letter written during Paul's ministry. He is acutely aware of the difficulty that the letter signature causes to his theory.

Donfried's solution is ingenious, to say the least. He argues that 2 Thessalonians was written by Timothy, with knowledge of 1 Thessalonians, shortly after the former letter, but without Pauline oversight. Therefore, he claims that, if 'Timothy is writing 2 Thessalonians on behalf of the apostolic group it would only be natural that Pauline tradition and authority receive an emphasis here that was not the case in the first letter.'<sup>72</sup> It is worth quoting in its entirety the scenario that Donfried constructs to account for the circumstances behind 2 Thessalonians:

<sup>71</sup> Donfried 1993: 128-144; here 132.

<sup>72</sup> Donfried 2002: 55.

If, indeed, 2 Thessalonians is attempting to partially augment and correct a misunderstanding of 1 Thessalonians, and if Paul and Timothy were co-authors of that letter, could not Timothy refer to Paul in the way he does?' Although Paul and his other two co-workers share in this same 'geistigen Eigentum' (intellectual property), it is Paul, who because of his high profile in Thessalonica, becomes the target of misunderstanding. If Paul is being attacked as a result of the gospel he and Timothy jointly share, and further, since Timothy knows well what was intended in the original letter (1 Thessalonians), is it not possible that the final rhetorical clincher of 2 Thessalonians is to draw explicitly upon Pauline apostolic authority, in which Timothy shares, as the final rebuttal to the misunderstandings rampant in Thessalonica? Certainly a letter from Timothy alone would not carry the same weight or be as effective in refuting distortions directed primarily at Paul.<sup>73</sup>

What is striking about this scenario is that it is basically the traditional view, with the caveat that Timothy wrote independently of Paul's guidance, but nonetheless managed to articulate Pauline teachings in a more Pauline way than the apostle himself. The second epistle is still written to the Thessalonians, very shortly after the first, and its purpose was to correct misperceptions concerning eschatological teaching. Along the way, Timothy provided a robust defence of apostolic authority, which Paul did not do in the first letter. However, the implication of this theory is that in his later genuine correspondence, such as 1 Corinthians and Galatians, Paul demonstrated his ability to provide the same type of authenticating note without any help from his co-worker. Hence, Timothy apparently 'invented' the apostolic signature formula to authenticate his pseudonymous composition, stating that Paul did this in every letter – although up to this point he never had done so. However, one must infer when he reported these actions to Paul, that his mentor was so impressed that on occasion he chose to employ the signature formula himself to authenticate his own letters. In fact with 1 Corinthians, written in the name of Paul and Sosthenes (presumably without Timothy's assistance) Paul happened to hit upon the exact formula as contained in 2 Thessalonians, although he had never seen that letter himself.

Despite the brilliance of this theory, some may think it just a little simpler to believe that Paul authored 2 Thessalonians himself, picking up the pen at 2 Thess 3.17 and appending his own signature. The only plausible way to hold that 2 Thessalonians is inauthentic when one considers the self-authenticating formula is to date the letter no earlier than the end of the first century, and to assume that a comprehensive collection of Paul's letters had emerged by this time. However, neither of these suppositions is without problems.

Therefore, when one undertakes an objective statistical measure of the stylistic variation between 2 Thessalonians and letters considered as authentically Pauline, contrary to the claims of those who present this as the strongest argument against authenticity, the epistle shows closer stylistic coherence with the *Hauptbriefe* than 1 Thessalonians, a letter whose authenticity is widely accepted. Secondly, the letter signature is hard to explain from the stance of inauthenticity, unless the unknown author had an extensive knowledge of the Pauline corpus. Even if that were the case, the extravagant claim that Paul's signature was his sign in every letter would simply not appear to be true when one consulted copies of Paul's letters contained in a later collection. Therefore, the case for authenticity appears far stronger than is usually acknowledged, and some of the 'classic' arguments against Pauline authorship are seen to have little objective support.

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<sup>73</sup> Donfried 2002: 56-57.



## Implications of the Pauline Authorship of 2 Thessalonians

It is worth briefly sketching out three implications that might impact Pauline studies, if one holds to the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians. First, perhaps the most minor of these implications but nonetheless an intriguing possibility in terms of Paul's epistolary practice is the possibility that he did in fact take up the pen, as a sign of authorship at the end of every letter, to add his personal greetings. However, on several occasions he simply did not draw explicit attention to this practice.<sup>74</sup> While this would not have been apparent when copies of the autographs were made, it would have been known to the author.

Second, and of greater theological importance, is the way Paul's eschatological thinking, as reflected in the two Thessalonian letters, reveals development and modification. Todd Still comments that 'eschatological variation does not necessarily indicate pseudonymity.'<sup>75</sup> While this appears true, it also sharply calls into question a tendency among some Pauline interpreters to defend Paul's theological consistency at all costs. Without doubt there was a set of central theological convictions that Paul held, such as understanding his role as apostle to the gentiles, or maintaining that the fundamental salvific event was achieved through Christ, or that believers now existed 'in Christ'. Notwithstanding this almost fixed set of core beliefs, Paul's theology appears more versatile and responsive to situationally based events. This not only involved having to formulate theology in reaction to circumstances he had not previously entertained such as the fate of believers who have 'fallen asleep' (1 Thess 4.13), or providing his own opinion on behaviour required of believers who were not married (1 Cor 7.25),<sup>76</sup> but as the Thessalonian correspondence demonstrates when his initial eschatological teaching failed to produce the ethical behaviours that Paul expected, he had little hesitation in reformulating his eschatological scheme so it emphasized an interim period (2 Thess 2.6-8) in which the Thessalonians were to act upon the ethical imperative to lead a quiet and godly governed life (2 Thess 3.6).

Third, this observation casts new light on Paul's interaction with his fledgling communities and perhaps suggests that Paul's pedagogical approach could in some ways be a more negotiated process than often envisaged, especially in matters which did not impinge on his core theological commitments. Mitchell has argued this thesis in relation to the Corinthian correspondence, where she notes the cautions in ancient exegesis against prematurely systematizing data. She states,

All early Christian exegesis is strategic and adaptable, and all the elite authors knew what commonplaces to appeal to for readings that aligned either side of the rhetorically constructed divide between readings that appealed "to the letter" and those that appealed "to the spirit." The goal of ancient biblical interpretation was utility to the purpose at hand, however contextually defined. And this began with Paul.<sup>77</sup>

This appears to reflect the way Paul instructs the Thessalonians concerning eschatological matters. Consequently, the multiple pieces of Pauline correspondence addressed to the Thessalonians 'attest that Paul was a thinker who was capable of

<sup>74</sup> Others have hinted at this possibility. Richards suggests that both 2 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians may have had autographed postscripts. He then potentially extends the possible implication of 2 Thess 3.17 is that 'all of his letters contained an autographed postscript whether explicitly mentioned or not.' Richards 1991: 190, n. 285. See also Deissmann 1927: 166-167, n.7.

<sup>75</sup> Still 1999: 53.

<sup>76</sup> On the discussion concerning 1 Cor 7.25 see Thiselton 2000: 567-572.

<sup>77</sup> Mitchell 2010: x.

development and maturation in his theology, and he adapted his theological formulations to address the pressing pastoral situations of his communities.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The case for the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians appears strong. However, 'authorship' must be conceived as broadly as it is in the case for the seven epistles widely regarded as genuine. Traditional arguments against Pauline authorship appear to have little analytic value. Paul's change in eschatological outlook between the two epistles says more about his pedagogical and pastoral approach. The supposed synoptic parallels between the two letters do not reveal direct literary dependence, especially once the fairly standardised opening and final greeting are removed from consideration. The stylistic deviation between 2 Thessalonians and the seven accepted Pauline letters when measured using a variety of statistical methods shows that 2 Thessalonians frequently is not as distant in stylistic terms from Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and Galatians, as is 1 Thessalonians. Finally, it is difficult to explain the letter signature except on the grounds that it is a genuine Pauline feature. In fact given the supposition in 2 Thess 2.2, real or imagined, that a forged letter might be circulating in Paul's name, Hill asks the logical question in relation to the authenticating signature, namely, 'how else would the real author have approached such a misunderstanding?'<sup>79</sup>

However, this question about authorship is not only of abstruse academic interest, nor is the issue only important for supporting pre-existing faith commitments. The issue matters because if the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is established, then it allows a larger and richer range of material that provides insight into the apostle's thought. Many of the debates surrounding the nature of Paul's thought in Romans as being coherent, consistent, or otherwise, may be elucidated through the perspectives provided in 2 Thessalonians in relation to eschatology. These developments reveal Paul to be capable of maturation in his theological conceptions, adaptable and responsive to pressing pastoral situations, and simultaneously a robust defender of his core theological convictions.<sup>80</sup> To neglect the evidence offered by 2 Thessalonians not only makes this letter a 'Cinderella' within the Pauline corpus, but more significantly it results in a skewed understanding of Paul, and it potentially reinforces the idea that theology is the study of immutable ideas, rather than a creative, flexible, and negotiated task, not only for Paul and his communities, but perhaps also for our own generation.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Foster 2011: 57-82; here 81.

<sup>79</sup> Hill 1990.

<sup>80</sup> Again see Foster 2011: 81-82.

<sup>81</sup> Dunn articulates this view when he notes that the study of Pauline theology is never mere reportage, he highlights the need to contextualize Pauline theology as well as to be engaged in a reconstructive enterprise since 'the letters themselves indicate the need to go behind the letters themselves, and they do so in such a way that we will never be able to explicate them as fully as we can without taking that fuller theology into account.' Dunn 1998: 15.

***Appendix: A Snapshot of Scholarly Opinions in Britain Concerning the Authorship of the Pauline Letters.***

When this paper was initially presented at the British New Testament Conference in Nottingham on the 2nd of September 2011, the audience was surveyed for their opinions on the authorship of the thirteen Pauline letters. The survey was not rigorously scientific, only those who felt inclined returned their forms. My estimate is that approximately 70% of the audience participated. For each of the thirteen Pauline letters and also for Hebrews<sup>82</sup> respondents were asked whether they considered each letter to be written by Paul, or not, or whether they were undecided. There were approximately 109 respondents, although two more cast an opinion only in relation to 2 Thessalonians, and one or two decided not to record their opinions in relation to the Pastoral Epistles. A final question in the survey asked respondents which of Paul's epistles they considered to be the first he wrote. The results were as follows:

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<sup>82</sup> Hebrews was included for two reasons. First, because in the early manuscript tradition Hebrews circulated with the Pauline epistles. Second, it was seen as offering some kind of comparison since the virtually unanimous opinion of modern scholarship is that the widespread early modern and Medieval opinion concerning Pauline authorship of Hebrews was incorrect.

## BNTC – RESULTS OF PAULINE AUTHORSHIP SURVEY

Was Paul the author of the following epistles?

	Yes	No	Uncertain	Total
Romans	109	0	0	109
1 Corinthians	109	0	0	109
2 Corinthians	109	0	0	109
Galatians	109	0	0	109
Ephesians	39	42	28	109
Philippians	108	1	0	109
Colossians	56	17	36	109
1 Thessalonians	109	0	0	109
2 Thessalonians	63	13	35	111
1 Timothy	23	59	25	107
2 Timothy	26	58	24	108
Titus	25	62	21	108
Philemon	108	0	1	109
Hebrews	0	100	9	109

The first epistle written by Paul was:

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Galatians	30
1 Thessalonians	63
1 Corinthians	2
Philippians	1
2 Thessalonians	1
Uncertain	12

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